

# The Black Pharaohs, Part One: Piye, the First Black Pharaoh from Nubia

By National Geographic, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.03.17

Word Count **931**



TOP: Detail on the Shrine of Taharqa in the Ashmolean Museum's exhibition of artifacts from ancient Egypt and Nubia in Oxford, England, November 23, 2011\.

BOTTOM: Map of Egypt's territorial control during the New Kingdom, 16th through 11th century B.C. TOP: Photo by Oli Scarff/Getty Images BOTTOM: WikiCommons

## *The first in a two-part series*

In the year 730 B.C., a man named Piye felt he had to save Egypt from declining any further. He decided there was only way to do it: he would invade and take over.

Egypt, the magnificent civilization that had built the great pyramids, had lost its way. It was being torn apart by selfish warlords battling for control.

For 20 years Piye had ruled over his own kingdom in Nubia, a stretch of Africa located mostly in present-day Sudan. However, he also considered himself the true ruler of Egypt as well. He felt he was the rightful heir to the religious traditions practiced by Egyptian pharaohs such as Ramses II and Thutmose III. Since Piye had probably never actually visited Egypt, some did not take his boast seriously.

Yet, Piye did indeed gather up a mighty army. He and his soldiers sailed north along the Nile River. At Thebes, the capital of Upper Egypt, they disembarked. Soon, they began to do battle with every army in their path.

By the end of a yearlong campaign, every leader in Egypt had surrendered. The powerful warlord Tefnakht sent a messenger to tell Piye, “Be gracious! I cannot see your face in the days of shame; I cannot stand before your flame, I dread your grandeur.” In exchange for their lives, the beaten leaders offered Piye their finest jewels and best horses. Piye took these offerings — but then the new ruler of all Egypt did something unexpected: He loaded up his new riches, and with his army sailed back to Nubia, never to return again. From then on, he ruled Egypt from afar.

When Piye died at the end of his 35-year reign in 715 B.C., his subjects honored his wishes by burying him in an Egyptian-style pyramid. He was the first pharaoh to receive such a burial in more than 500 years.

### **Images of the black Pharaoh Piye no longer exist**

Today we have no idea what Piye looked like. Images of Piye on the elaborate granite slabs, or stelae, celebrating his conquest of Egypt have long since been chiseled away. On a vandalized artwork in the temple at the Nubian capital of Napata, only Piye’s legs remain. We are left with a single physical detail of the man — namely, that his skin was dark.

Piye was the first of the so-called black pharaohs — a series of Nubian kings who ruled over Egypt for three-quarters of a century. The black pharaohs reunified a divided Egypt and filled its landscape with glorious monuments. They created a vast empire that stretched from present-day Sudan all the way north to the Mediterranean Sea.

Until recently, their history largely went untold. Gradually, however, archaeologists have resurrected their story. They have also come to recognize that the black pharaohs did not appear out of nowhere. They sprang from a powerful and advanced African civilization that had flourished on the southern banks of the Nile for 2,500 years.

### **Early scholarship about the Nubian culture was racist**

Racism was one main reason it took scholars so long to grasp just how advanced Nubian culture was. Nineteenth-century explorers who arrived at the central stretch of the Nile River excitedly reported the discovery of elegant temples and pyramids — the ruins of an ancient Nubian civilization called Kush. However, scholars of the time could not imagine that these splendors could be the product of a black race. The archaeologist Richard Lepsius, for example, said the Kushites must surely have been white.

Even famed Egyptologist George Reisner showed this same prejudice. It was Reisner's own discoveries between 1916 and 1919 that offered the first archaeological evidence of the Nubian kings who ruled over Egypt. Yet he undercut his own findings by insisting that black Africans could not possibly have constructed the monuments he was excavating. He believed Nubia’s leaders, including Piye, were light-skinned Egypto-Libyans who ruled over the “primitive” Africans.

For years, historians flip-flopped. They either said the Kushite pharaohs were actually “white” or claimed their civilization was just a weak imitation of true Egyptian culture. For the most part, historians simply ignored the period of Nubian rule over Egypt.

### **As more Nubian artifacts were discovered, the story slowly changed**

Things began to change slowly beginning in the 1960s, as more Nubian artifacts were unearthed. In 2003, archeologist Charles Bonnet discovered seven large stone statues of Nubian pharaohs.

The Nubians originally had their own separate, advanced culture, entirely distinct from that of the Egyptians. The Egyptians did not like having such a powerful neighbor to the south, however. So the pharaohs of the 18th dynasty (1539–1292 B.C.) sent armies to conquer Nubia.

The Egyptian conquerers installed Nubian chiefs as administrators and sent the children of favored Nubians to be educated in Thebes. The elite Nubians eagerly adopted the cultural and religious customs of Egypt. They worshipped Egyptian gods, particularly Amun, and used the Egyptian language. They adopted Egyptian burial styles and, later, built magnificent pyramids.

By the eighth century B.C., Egypt had split into warring camps, with the north ruled by Libyan chiefs. The Libyan rulers only pretended to worship Egyptian gods, in order to win over the Egyptian population. Once firmly in power, they became much less religious, and the Egyptian priests at Karnak feared the country would become godless. Who could return Egypt to its former state of might and holiness?

The Egyptian priests found their answer: the Nubians, a people who, without setting foot inside Egypt, had preserved Egypt’s religious traditions. In some ways, they had become even more Egyptian than the Egyptians themselves.

**Quiz**

- 1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-6].  
Based on the article, why was Egypt important to Piye?
- (A) He considered himself the true leader of Egypt.
  - (B) He had studied in Egypt for a time as a child.
  - (C) He believed he could easily conquer Egypt.
  - (D) He wanted to learn how the pyramids had been built.
- 2 Read the section "Early scholarship about the Nubian culture was racist."  
What effect did racism have on the scholarship about Nubian culture?
- (A) It stopped scholars from being able to travel to learn about the Nubian culture.
  - (B) It helped secure funding for Egyptologists to travel to the Nile River to learn about Nubia.
  - (C) It prevented scholars from acknowledging that the Nubian civilization could have been made by black people.
  - (D) It made the work of Nubian scholars doubted in many academic circles.
- 3 Which detail from the section "As more Nubian artifacts were discovered, the story slowly changed" would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Things began to change slowly beginning in the 1960s, as more Nubian artifacts were unearthed.
  - (B) The Nubians originally had their own separate, advanced culture, entirely distinct from that of the Egyptians.
  - (C) The Egyptians did not like having such a powerful neighbor to the south, however.
  - (D) The Egyptian conquerors installed Nubian chiefs as administrators and sent the children of favored Nubians to be educated in Thebes.
- 4 Which detail BEST reflects Piye's main goal?
- (A) to invade Egypt and steal its spoils
  - (B) to save Egyptian culture by taking over Egypt
  - (C) to learn about the Egyptian way of life
  - (D) to expand his influence around the world